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Early Childhood Is Time to Intervene to Protect Health

**By Melanie Reynolds
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It's a fact: many of our nation's worst public health problems stem at least in part from childhood trauma.

This was first proved in the late 1990s, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente conducted a large research project called the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. Scientists looked at the effects of negative childhood experiences on the participants' future quality of life and health. The adverse experiences included neglect, abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and crime.

Some have called the ACE Study "the most important public health study you never heard of."

Stress and the Brain

The stunning result was that traumatic experiences and high stress in childhood hamper brain development and contribute to disease and early death.

Participants who had experienced four or more types of trauma in childhood were 4 to 12 times more likely to suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, or suicide as adults. What may be more surprising is that they also had a higher risk of obesity, heart disease, cancer, and chronic lung disease. These are some of the leading causes of death in Lewis and Clark County and the nation.

At the same time the ACE Study was under way, parallel research found that toxic stress physically damages a child's developing brain. An overload of stress hormones prevents a child from learning well in school.

How can you develop a chronic disease like obesity because of something that happened to you as a toddler? The mechanism works something like this: Trauma in childhood disrupts brain development. This leads to social, emotional, and cognitive impairment, which in turn encourages the adoption of risky behaviors like drug or alcohol abuse. These behaviors can lead to disease, disability, and even early death.

What's Your Risk?

According to the ACE Study, traumatic childhood experiences are quite common. A whopping two-thirds of the 17,000 people in the study had at least one. Eighteen percent of Montanans have experienced four or more. You can figure out how you would score by taking the quiz at <http://acestoohigh.com/got-your-ace-score/>. The results can give you some insight into your risk of chronic disease.

Be sure to check out your “resiliency score” on the same web page. It’s based on protective factors that can help to mitigate childhood trauma and reduce risk.

A Community Solution

What I think we should conclude from this research is that it’s important as a community to offer support to parents if we want the next generation of Montanans to be strong, resilient, and healthy. Lewis and Clark County residents appreciated this when they ranked infant and maternal health among the top five priorities in the 2013 Community Health Improvement Plan.

The ACE Study demonstrates dramatically that if we engage our community in the protection and nurturing of our children, we should be able to significantly reduce serious and common health and social problems.

Healthy Families Program

At the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department, we recognize that supporting new parents is an effective public health strategy. We offer this support through our Healthy Families Program – a team of highly trained nurses, social workers, and nutritionists who link families with information on wellness, development, attachment and bonding, parent skill building, and nutrition. The team also provides caregivers with safe, stable, nurturing relationships to help lower their stress level as they begin the challenging art of parenting.

Fortunately, adversity is not destiny. Experts agree that safe, stable, nurturing relationships promote resiliency. It’s important that we all understand the negative effects of early trauma and toxic stress so we can foster a community that values efforts to improve family relationships and promote secure childhoods.

To learn more about the health department’s Healthy Families program, call 457-8912 or visit www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org.

The 2013 Community Health Improvement Plan is available on the same web page.